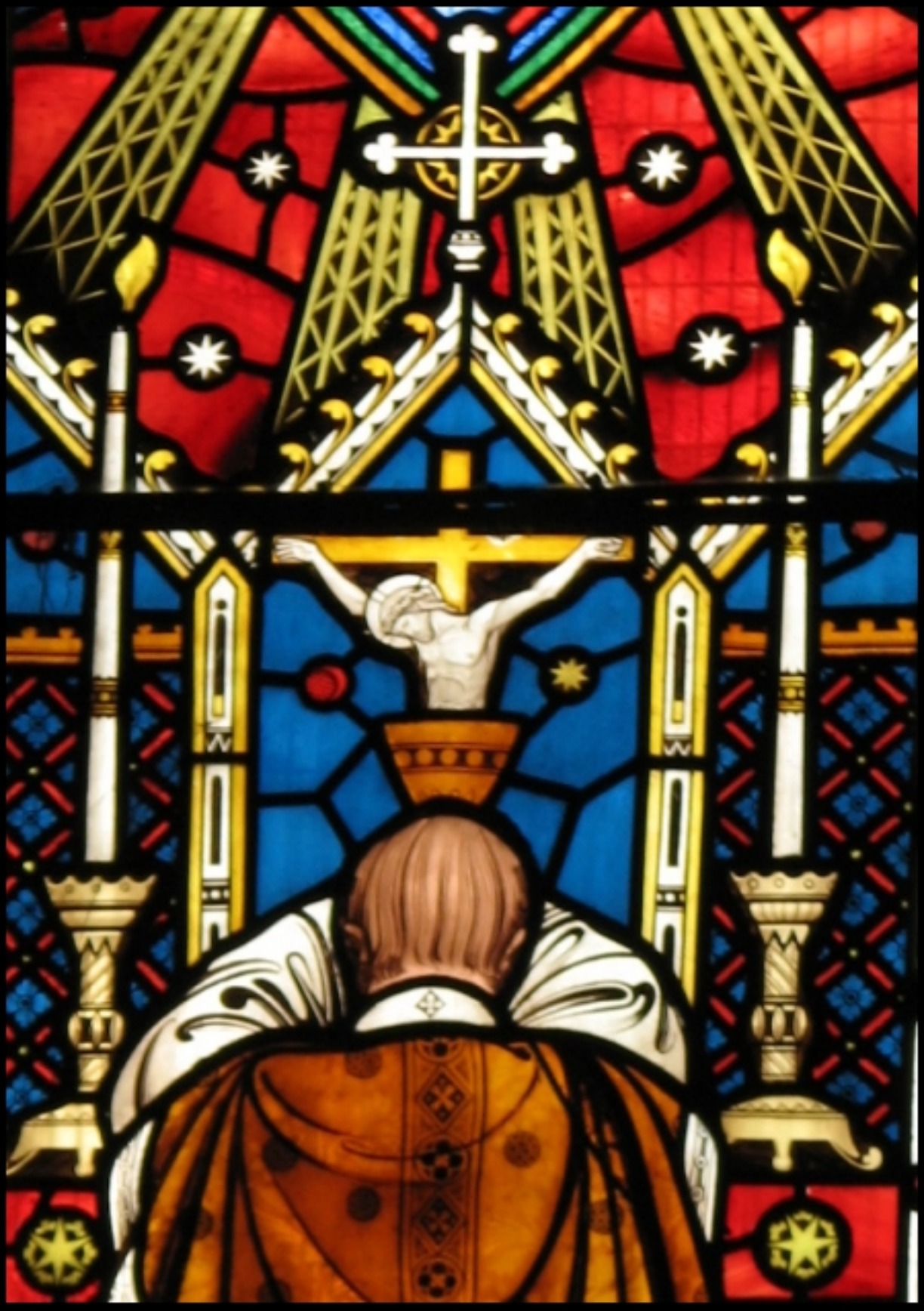
Mass



~ Father J D Buist, CSSR

Preface

Our Catholic Churches are crowded, in some cases ten times over, for Sunday Mass. Yet it is a fact that many Catholics do not fully realize what is going on at the altar. They are perhaps present only because the Church commands their presence. This booklet tells very simply what is the Mass, why it is the most important thing in the life of the Catholic, and how we can fully profit by it. All that is written here can be understood and put into practice by any Catholic.

The Mass is Sacrifice Offered to God

The Mass differs entirely from other parts of Catholic worship in that it is the offering of a sacrifice. We commonly speak of it as "the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass." To understand what the Mass is, then, it is necessary to first understand what is a sacrifice. To answer the question "What is a sacrifice?" we might answer that

"A sacrifice is the offering of a victim by a priest to God alone in testimony of His being Supreme Lord of all things."

Let us explain these words. From the very beginning of mankind's existence on this earth, men wished to show that they acknowledged God as Lord of Life and Death, to Whom they belonged, on Whom they depended for everything. They wished to show that He was "the Supreme Lord of all things." The best way that they could do this - it was the way God Himself commanded - was by offering sacrifice to Him. They took some creature of God - a lamb, a goat, an ox - killed it and offered it up to God. The animal thus offered to God in sacrifice was called the "victim" of the sacrifice. The place where it was offered (usually a stone table) was the "altar" of sacrifice. The men officially appointed to offer sacrifice in the name of all the people were called "priests." These words, "*victim*", "*altar*", "*priest*", are always linked with the idea of offering sacrifice to God. This kind of worship was offered not to any created being, however holy, but "to God alone", the Creator and Lord of the universe.

Sacrifice in the Old Testament

When men offered their sacrifices to God, they meant thereby to offer themselves to Him. They meant the outward sacrifice to be a sign of their acknowledgement of God's absolute ownership of all they had and possessed, and of their utter submission and surrender of themselves. As Saint Thomas Aquinas says,

"Exterior sacrifice is representative of true interior sacrifice, by means of which the human mind offers itself to God as to the principle of its creation, the author of its operations, and the goal of its happiness."

We read of these sacrifices in many parts of the Old Testament,

"Abel also offered of the firstlings of his flock - and the Lord had respect to Abel and his offerings."

"And Noe built an altar unto the Lord, and taking of all cattle and fowls that were clean, offered holocausts upon the altar."

Of Jacob we read, "and raising an altar there, he invoked upon it the most mighty God of Israel."

"And Moses built an altar...and they offered holocausts and sacrificed calves to the Lord."

From our Bible History, we remember how god even asked Abraham to offer to Him in sacrifice his own son Isaac. Abraham made ready to obey; God was pleased with his obedience, and God bad him to offer a ram instead.

In later Jewish history, sacrifice was the principal part of the worship of God in the Temple of Jerusalem. Heather peoples, too, even to this day almost all have sacrifices as part of their religious worship, a fact which goes to show how natural and instinctive a form of worship sacrifice is.

The Four Purposes of Sacrifice

When men thus worshipped "the Almighty and Eternal God to Whom alone the homage of sacrifice is due," they had in mind those four purposes which really include all man's worship of God, viz.,

- Adoration of God
- thanking God
- making atonement to God for sin committed
- asking God for favours

These are the four ends for which sacrifice is offered

- Adoration
- Atonement
- Thanksgiving
- Petition

A Sacrifice on the Cross

Now, you may ask, why do we not still offer these sacrifices of animals to God as the Jews did? Because when He was on earth Jesus Christ offered a sacrifice of infinite value which was never to cease. This was the sacrifice of Himself on the cross. Completely submitting and surrendering Himself to the Will of God the Eternal Father, Jesus offered the sacrifice of His own life on Mount Calvary.

Jesus Himself was the victim offered in this Sacrifice.

Jesus Himself was also the priest who offered it.

He offered it on what we call the "altar" of the cross.

Now, since Jesus was a Divine Person, this sacrifice which He offered was of infinite value. It perfectly fulfilled all four of the purposes of sacrifice.

- It gave to God the Adoration and Praise that He deserves.
- It thanked God adequately for all His benefits.
- It made atonement to God for all sin.
- It obtained from God all grace necessary for mankind.

The greatest fact in the history of the world, after the Incarnation, is the fact that the God-made-man Jesus Christ once offered Himself in sacrifice on the cross.

A Perpetual Sacrifice

Let us now turn our minds to the Last Supper of Our Lord on Holy Thursday night. He and His Apostles were gathered together in a room in Jerusalem. In a few hours' time - on Good Friday afternoon - He was to offer Himself in sacrifice on the Cross. All His thoughts were about his, the principal reason for His coming on earth, the great sacrifice He was so soon to offer. He did not want that sacrifice to be offered only for the few followers of His own time; He did not want His sacrifice to be just an isolated fact in history. He wanted it to be for all time and for all His followers down the centuries, indeed for all mankind. So He arranged in a marvelous way that His sacrifice would be always continued.

He changed bread into His own Body, and He changed wine into His own Blood, and gave to His Apostles and their successors the power to do likewise so that the sacrifice He offered on the cross would be always continued. He left to His priests the power to change bread into that same body which was nailed to the cross, and to change wine into that same blood which he shed on the cross, to offer that Body and Blood to God and thus to renew and continue always the sacrifice of Calvary.

Consider the words which Our Lord used. Taking bread - "This is My Body which shall be delivered up for you." Taking the chalice with wine - "This is My Blood of the New Testament which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins." To His Apostles and their successors He said, "Do this in commemoration of Me." The priests of the Catholic church have continued to do as Christ did ever since. By power given them at their Ordination, they change bread

and wine into the Body of Christ and offer anew to God the sacrifice which Jesus offered on the Cross.

The Holy Mass is the renewal and continuation of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

The Mass is the wonderful way in which Christ arranged for His sacrifice on the cross to be continued.

The Mass is Calvary continued.

The Sacrifice of Calvary Renewed and Continued

The Council of Trent, one of those great historic assemblies representative of the entire Catholic Church, speaking of the Mass solemnly affirms that Jesus Christ

> "at the Last Supper....in order to leave....a visible Sacrifice such as the exigencies of our human nature demanded, wherein that Sacrifice of Blood once and for all to be wrought on the Cross should be represented and its memory abide to the end of the world, and its saving power applied for the remission of sins...offered His Body and Blood to God the Father under the appearance of bread and wine, and gave it, under the same appearances, to his Apostles whom he then appointed priests of the New Testament...."

The Sacrifice which is offered in the Mass is essentially the same as the sacrifice which Jesus offered on the Cross.

There is one priest, namely Jesus Himself, for he is the principal Offerer in the Mass.

There is the same Victim, Jesus Himself.

There are the same four great purposes - Adoration, Thanksgiving, Atonement, Petition.

The same self-oblation and surrender of Himself which Jesus made on the cross to the will of His Father persists in His offering of the Mass.

There is this difference between the sacrifice of the Mass and the sacrifice of the cross. On the cross there was a

natural shedding of Christ's Blood from His Body. In the Mass there is also a shedding of Blood which takes place mysteriously through the separate consecration of bread and wine into Our Lord's Body and Blood.

There is this difference also. Christ was the Priest Who offered the Sacrifice of the Cross and He is the Principal Priest in the Mass. But, on the Cross He exercised His Priesthood immediately, whereas in the Mass he uses an earthly priest as His instrument.

Let us bear in mind above all that the Body and Blood of Jesus offered in sacrifice to God in the Mass under the appearance of bread and wine is that same Body and Blood which was offered in sacrifice on the cross.

The Mass is the way Christ arranged for His sacrifice on the cross to be always continued and its benefits applied to mankind.

The Mass is Calvary continued.

The Centre of all Divine Worship

From what we have seen, we can easily understand why the Mass is the Principal Thing in Catholic life. It is the sacrifice to God of a Victim worthier by far than any other victim ever offered in sacrifice. That Victim is the God-man Jesus Christ. The Mass therefore perfectly fulfills all purposes of sacrifice.

Adoration - We, God's creatures, have the duty, and the privilege, of adoring and praising our Creator. "The Lord Thy God shalt thou adore." We can actually give to God the Adoration that He deserves if we unite our adoration to the adoration given Him by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the Mass.

Thanksgiving - We have the duty of showing gratitude to God for his benefits. We can thank Him as He deserves to be thanked by offering the Mass. Do we not call it a "Eucharistic" sacrifice - a word which means thanksgiving? In the Mass, we unite our thanksgiving with that of Jesus Himself.

Atonement - We have all sinned and we all need to make atonement to God for our sins. We can do so completely by offering to an offended God the sacrifice of the "Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world." Why need we fear on account of our past sins when we can offer to God the atonement of Jesus Himself in the Mass?

Petition - On our journey through life, we constantly need God's help. This help is given us in answer to prayer. The most powerful prayer possible is the Mass. It is the great sacrifice of petition. In it we unite our prayer to the all-powerful prayer of Jesus Christ.

The Adoration, Thanksgiving, Atonement, and Petition of Jesus Christ Himself are offered to God in the Mass.

Can we not see then that the Mass is the greatest act of divine worship possible?

"To me nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling, so overwhelming, as the Mass - I could attend Masses forever and not be tired. It is not a mere form of worship; it is a great Action, the greatest that can be here on earth." - *Blessed John Henry Newman*

The Mass is Public, Official, Collective Worship

This great act of divine worship, the Sacrifice of the Mass, is offered to God not as an act of private devotion on the part of the priest or the people who attend, but it is public and official worship which the whole Church offers to God. The word used to express this is "liturgical" worship, as distinct from purely personal devotion.

An illustration will serve to explain this. Supposing some distinguished man whom you happen to know comes to your city. You go to his house and pay him your personal respects. This is an act of personal devotion to him. Afterwards the whole city, joining with the Mayor and Councillors who represent all the citizens, give this man a public civic reception. This is an act of public, official homage as distinct from personal homage. Apply this example to the worship of God and you see the difference between your personal worship and the official liturgical worship which the whole Church gives to God. The offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass is liturgical worship.

The Mass is Offered By All the People

In the ancient sacrifices offered by the Jewish people, all the people gathered before the altar joined in mind and heart in offering the sacrifice to God. The priest at the altar was their duly appointed representative. So it is with the Sacrifice of the Mass. All people are meant to join with the priest in offering the sacrifice. They have a right to come and join in mind and heart in offering sacrifice because of the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation which they have received. These two Sacraments give to all Christians a certain sharing in the priesthood of Christ - not so great a sharing as the Sacrament of Holy Orders, of course - so that all who have received them have the right to co-offer the sacrifice with the priest who actually stands at the altar. Thus, Saint Peter, referring to all Christ's Christians says,

"You are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a purchased people...."

Pope Pius XII writes

"Through the Eucharistic Sacrifice Christ Our Lord wished to give special evidence to the faithful of our union among ourselves and with our Divine Heard.... For there the sacred ministers act in the person not only of Our Saviour but of the whole Mystical Body (the Church), and everyone of the faithful. In this act of sacrifice through the hands of the priest, whose word alone has brought the Immaculate Lamb to be present on the altar, the faithful themselves with one desire and one prayer offer It to the Eternal Father - the most acceptable Victim of praise and propitiation for the Church's universal needs."

If we take up the Missal and follow the different parts of the Mass, we shall see that we are all co-offerers of the sacrifice with the priest.

"Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty," says the priest to us.

Again, he prays, "...grant that the sacrifice we offer this day may be pleasing to Thee."

"We offer unto Thee, O Lord, the chalice of salvation..."

"We therefore beseech Thee, O Lord, graciously accept this offering..."

The Mass is Offered For All the People

Those for whom an individual Mass is said are, of course, the principal partakers of its fruits. Those attend its celebration obviously benefit more than the absent, but looking at it as the one, indivisible perpetuation of Calvary, the Mass is offered for the whole people of God. There is nothing narrow or limited in the scope of this great sacrifice.

Turn again to the prayers of the Mass and hear the priest offering the host - "Accept, O Holy Father...his unspotted Host which I...offer Thee...for all here present as also for all faithful Christians living and dead."

Hear him as he offers the chalice - "We offer unto Thee, O Lord, the chalice of salvation, beseeching Thy clemency that it may ascend in the sigh of Thy Divine Majesty for an odour of sweetness for our salvation and for that of the whole world."

To the invitation of the priest, "Pray brethren that my sacrifice and yours may be pleasing to God the Father Almighty," we reply, "May the Lord receive this sacrifice from thy hands to the praise and glory of His Name, to our benefit and that of all His Holy Church."

Again in the first prayer of the Canon, the priest refers to the Holy Sacrifice "which in the first place we offer Thee for Thy Holy Catholic Church."

The Mass is a public, official, corporate Sacrifice offered to God by the whole Church and for the whole Church in Adoration, Thanksgiving, Atonement, and Petition.

Attend Mass

The Mass being what it is - the Sacrifice of Calvary continued - the greatest act of religion possible for mankind, there should not be any need to urge Catholics to come frequently before the altar and offer this Sacrifice. This is the great privilege - and the great duty - of any Catholic, to offer to God the Sacrifice of His Own Son in the Mass. The non-Catholic "goes to church," but the Catholic "goes to Mass." The "church" is a building which has grown up around the altar of sacrifice. If our churches were destroyed, we would still continue offering the Sacrifice. If, as has often happened in the past, Mass was forbidden by a persecuting power and priests proscribed, our people would gather in secret, even under penalty of death, and offer the Sacrifice with their priests on the mountainside as in Ireland in the days of persecution.

So important an act of religion does the Church consider the Mass that She obliges Her children to come at least every Sunday and offer Mass. Sometimes shallow-thinking people will say that they can worship God at home or out under the sky better than in a stuffy church. That might be true if in the church there were not an altar, and a priest, and a Victim, and a Sacrifice of infinite value, the Holy Mass.

Be loyal to Sunday Mass.

See that the children are loyal to Sunday Mass.

Could not at least one member of your family be present during the week at the offering of Mass?

Do not be guilty of the discourtesy to God of coming late to Mass.

Follow the Mass

With only a little thought and attention, we can follow the Mass intelligently and profitably. One excellent way to do this is to use the Missal. We can then follow the different parts of the Mass in English as the priest says them in Latin.

Still, the Missal is not absolutely necessary. Even without it one can join in mind and heart in offering the sacrifice. One writer says that "the old and simple way" in which our forefathers assisted at Mass is the best way -

"following with our looks the actions, with our ears the words, with our voices the chant, and with our hearts the vital mystery that is hidden beneath all this; just looking, listening, singing, communing, realizing, making our own the sense of the Apostles - 'Lord, it is good for us to be here.'"

Since the Holy Sacrifice is offered for the four purposes - Adoration, Thanksgiving, Atonement, Petition - we will be assisting at Mass in a true spirit of sacrifice if we adore, give thanks, are sorry for sin, ask god for grace. We can include all these things our joining of our will to the will of Jesus offering Himself to the Father.

Communion at Mass

In the sacrifices offered by the Jews of old, an important part was the consuming by the priest and the people of the whole or part of the victim offered. This is called the "sacrificial banquet." So, too, in the Sacrifice of the New Law, the Mass, there is the consuming by the priest and the people of the Victim offered, viz., the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Since this is part of the Sacrifice, we ought to receive Holy Communion during Mass rather than before it or apart from it, unless necessity demands. We are not meant to think of Holy Communion as a Eucharistic devotion that is quite separate from the Mass. It is the sacrificial banquet. It is the consuming by the offerers of the Victim offered in sacrifice.

Live the Mass

The Mass is a continual Sacrifice. As moment succeeds moment, day is breaking in some part of the world, and with the dawn comes the morning Mass. There are more than 300,000 Masses every twenty-four hours. There is not one moment of the day or night when in some part of the Universal Church Calvary is not being renewed and continued. The most stupendous thing in the Christian religion, and the thing to which everything else in that religion is subordinate, is the fact that this Sacrifice is being always offered to God. The Holy Church gives us devotions without number to help us in our spiritual life. Let us not lose right proportion. Devotions are meant to be merely helpful. They are always secondary to the Mass. The Mass is the principal means of Grave. The Mass is the greatest act of Divine worship.

Since this continual Sacrifice is the greatest source of Grace for mankind, let us see that we often unite ourselves to it. At our morning prayers especially let us offer our day to God in union with Mass -

"My God, I offer to You all my thoughts, words, actions and suffering of this day in union with all the Masses that will be offered today."

We could perhaps renew the offering at times during the day. Thus, by a simple thought and a simple act of will, we can always turn to the Mass as to a mighty reservoir of Grace. Many sick people especially, who cannot concentrate their minds on prayer, find the practice of uniting their sufferings with the Mass to be very profitable and consoling.

The Very Core of Our Being

Here are some very beautiful words on the Mass from Caryll Houselander -

"It is not only a set of old, beautiful prayers offered each morning in our parish church. No, it is a sacrifice which is always being offered and in which we can always take part at any time and anywhere. It is not a sacrifice offered by a priest in which our part is merely that of a devout audience. It is a sacrifice which gathers every circumstance of our life to itself and is the very core of our being.

"We need not fear that because we might not be able to be actually present at Mass, Mass is no longer celebrated. Mass will always be celebrated while the world lasts. It is a sacrifice foretold by the prophets which must always be offered from sunrise to sunset, a promise to us which cannot and will not be broken.

"It will continue. There will always be those who will offer Mass, and Christ will always, with His divine ingenuity and lowliness, find a place to come to us.

"This being so, we can always, though possibly from a distance, unit ourselves with the Mass that is being offered us for us, never a moment when we cannot lift ourselves up with Christ Crucified.

"For so long as we cherish the Mass in our hearts, the flame of faith will burn brightly in us, and each time we join in the Mass, though not bodily present, we shall receive all the illimitable grace of the Mass, and shall have the power of Christ to adore and atone, and all that we have to suffer and offer, all that we are, will be changed into Him and will be

one thing with the redeeming sacrifice of His triumphant love."

The Mass in History

The Catholic Church has been the greatest civilizing influence the world has known, and in the Catholic church there is nothing greater than the Mass.

"Wherever Christianity spread the first thing to be set up was the altar of the Mass. There the nations were taught to worship. What they needed when they accepted the faith of One God was public, common and impressive ritual worship. In those six centuries (AD 400 - 1000) the great Roman rite of the Mass was planted everywhere from Italy to Britain, from Spain to Scandinavia. The altar brought with it the churches, at first small and simple, then more noble and impressive; it entailed a trained and separate priesthood - hence, the Blessed Eucharist, with its altars, its temples, its liturgy and its priesthood, destroyed false worships, killed heathen superstition, joined fierce and hostile tribes and peoples in one faith, gathered kings and their subjects, warriors and women, freemen and serfs, in one fellowship; and thus as the years went on, in the midst of strife and much bloodshed and constant change, a united Christendom, knit together by forces higher than those of flesh and blood, grew up around the table of Eucharistic Communion." (Bishop Hedley)

Hilaire Belloc writes of the Sacrifice of the Mass - "You are doing what the human race has done for thousands of years - in the Mass you do all that the race needs to do, and has done for all those ages where religion was concerned; there you have the separate and sacred enclosure, the altar, the priest in his vestments, the set ritual, the ancient and hierarchic tongue, and all your nature cries out for in the matter of worship."

Conclusion

Jesus Christ offered Himself in sacrifice on the cross.

At His last supper, Jesus arranged that His sacrifice would be always continued.

His sacrifice is always continued in the Mass.

The Mass is essentially the same sacrifice as that of the cross.

The Mass is a public, official, corporate sacrifice offered by the whole Church and for the whole church.

The Mass is the greatest act of worship that can be offered to God.

Be often present at Mass.

Follow the Mass.

Live the Mass.

When Christ offered His sacrifice on Calvary "there stood by the Cross of Jesus, His Mother." Mary willingly offered her Son in sacrifice. May she then obtain that we value more and more the sacrifice of "Calvary continued," the Mass.

About This eBook

The text of this file is taken from the booklet Mass by Father J D Buist, C.Ss.R. It received the Nihil Obstat by Ioannes O'Cuiv, and an Imprimi Potest from Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, C.S.Sp. It was published in Dublin, Ireland on 31 August 1950. A scan of the booklet is available online at http://lxoa.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/mass/. The cover image is a detail of a photograph of an early Victorian stained glass depiction of a priest offering Mass in a chasuble, the Lady chapel at Saint Thomas', Oxford, England; swiped with permission from the flickr.com account of Father Lawrence Lew, OP (http://www.flickr.com/photos/paullew/).

For more ebooks free for the downloading, and information on thousands of saints, beati and venerables of the Church, come see us at ***CatholicSaints.Info*** and ***CatholicSaints.Mobi***.